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ABSTRACT

In his discussion of interpersonal balance theory Heider postulated that unit relationships induce sentiment relationships. The relationship between anticipated interaction and interpersonal attraction was examined with female high school seniors (N=109) who read a description of a fictitious student and rated that student as someone they would like or dislike. Subjects were told that: (1) they would participate in a dyad to work on problem-solving tasks (work condition) or to discuss various topics (social condition); (2) the student they rated would or would not be their dyad partner; and (3) that student had a history of success or failure at the dyad task. Results showed significant main effects of anticipated interaction and of partners' ability. Subjects responded more favorably to partners with whom they anticipated interaction than to those with whom they did not anticipate interaction. Subjects also responded more favorably to partners with high ability than to partners with low ability. No main effect for type of task (work or social) was found. The findings tend to provide support for Heider's balance theory. (NRB)

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Anticipated Rewards vs. Dissonance Explanations of Interpersonal Attraction

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PREFATORY NOTE

This HumRRO Professional Paper is based on a presentation by Dr. Richard L. Miller to the Division of Personality and Social Psychology, American Psychological Association, at its 89th Annual Meeting, in Los Angeles, Calif., August 1981.

Dr. Miller is a Senior Staff Scientist in HumRRO, and heads the HumRRO research team in Heidelberg, Germany.

The research reported here examines the relationship between anticipated interaction and interpersonal attraction through an experiment in which female subjects evaluated a fictitious female partner with whom they either expected, or did not expect, to interact. Partner ability and type of interaction task were also varied.

ANTICIPATED REWARDS VS. DISSONANCE EXPLANATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION

Richard L. Miller
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In his discussion of interpersonal balance theory, Heider (1958) postulated that unit relationships (entities perceived as belonging together) induce sentiment relationships (liking). In an interesting application of this principle, Berscheid and Walster (1969) noted that anticipating interaction with another person should form a unit relationship between you and that person. Thus, a positive sentiment towards others should result from anticipating interaction with them (see Darley and Berscheid, 1967).

What are the theoretical explanations that could most plausibly explain the mechanism whereby individuals positively evaluate those with whom they expect to interact? One explanation may be derived from dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). According to this explanation, evaluations of a potential partner are inflated in order to reduce the dissonance created by interacting with an unknown and perhaps not so desirable partner. Thus, the subject "hedges his bets" in assessing the potential partner since the condition "he is undesirable" and "he is my partner" are not comfortably related. Qualified support for this explanation can be found in a study by Layton and Insko (1974) which suggested that partners who were seen as dissimilar (and thus potentially dissonance arousing) were more liked when the subject anticipated interaction with them than when he did not.

A second theoretical explanation submitted by Berscheid and Walster (1969) is the "anticipated rewards of future interaction" notion. According to this approach, which is derived from Thibaut and Kelly's (1959) exchange theory, individuals are attracted to those with whom they anticipate interaction when it is likely that the interaction will provide positive rewards to the individual.

Research to date has not been particularly supportive of this notion. Sutherland and Insko (1973) found an interaction between anticipated interaction and the interestingness of the interaction task on attraction. Anticipated interaction had a greater effect on attraction for an interesting topic than for a dull one. However, Sutherland and Insko (1973) also found that there were no interaction effects between attitude similarity (another measure of potential rewardingness) and anticipated interaction on subjects' liking for perspective partners. Layton and Insko (1974) also found no relationship between attitude similarity and anticipated interaction on partner ratings. However, each of these studies has problems which preclude the dismissal of the anticipated rewards notion. In the Sutherland and Insko study, attitude similarity was on a basis unrelated to the task at hand. While the Layton and Insko (1974) study corrects this problem it is also handicapped since there was not a significant main effect of anticipating interaction on liking. As the authors note, it seemed that the subjects in their study did not particularly look forward to a discussion of the routine issues involved in the anticipated interaction. Thus the non-rewardingness of the situation may cancel the potential rewardingness of a similar other.

In order to adequately assess the anticipation of rewards notion and to conceptually replicate the previous research, a different manipulation of potential rewardingness was utilized: superior ability. A number of studies have demonstrated that superior ability is positively related to interpersonal attraction (Shaw and Gilcrest, 1955; Mettee and Riskind, 1974; Miller and Suls, 1978).

The use of ability provides a good test of the predictions derived from the two theories. Thus, if the anticipation of rewards explanation is correct, then partners of high ability, who are potentially more rewarding, should be more positively evaluated under conditions of anticipated interaction. Conversely, if the dissonance notion is correct, then partners of low ability, who should be most dissonance arousing, would be less negatively evaluated under anticipated interaction than under no anticipated interaction. The present experiment also examined the effects of type of interaction. As noted by Sutherland and Insko (1973), anticipated interaction may be related only to interesting interactions. In the present study the two types of interactions used were work and social situations. No specific theoretical hypotheses were proposed for this variable. It was included because of a possible interaction between type of task and partner ability which is more typically related to work situations than social situations.

METHOD

One hundred and nine female high school seniors participated in the experiment as partial fulfillment of a course requirement in general psychology.

Subjects reported individually to the experimenter and were informed that they were participating in an experiment on communication processes and that for the bulk of the experiment they would be working in two-person groups. Those subjects in the work condition were then informed that the purpose of the dyad would be to work on various problem solving tasks which would be outlined later. Subjects in the social condition were told that the dyad would be rapping about a variety of topics which would be outlined later. Subjects were then informed that, for now, the experimenter simply wanted to introduce each of the subjects to another student taking part in the study and to find out what the subjects' impression of her was. Subjects were then taken individually to a nearby office.

In the anticipated future interaction condition, the subject was told that the student whose description she was going to read would be her partner for the social/work task. In the no anticipated future interaction condition, subjects were told that the student whose description she was going to read would not, however, be her partner for the social/work task. The rationale given for the partner rating activity was that the experimenter wanted to know something about the effect of differential information on impression formation and interpersonal interaction. The subject was then handed a two-page description of the partner.

Before reading the description the subject was told by the experimenter that the partner described had previously participated in a study similar to this one and had done very well (not well at all) on the task, and that the subject should keep in mind that the partner had a history of success/failure on the task.

The subjects then read the description which included a variety of personal traits, social habits, etc. Both positive and negative characteristics were included. After reading the description, subjects were asked to rate their partner on the questionnaire provided using a seven-point scale ranging from (1) like very much to (7) dislike very much. Subjects were assured that this information would remain confidential and that the student rated would not know about the rating. Subjects were reminded that they would or would not be interacting with this partner depending upon condition.

RESULTS

The liking data was analyzed by a 2 (anticipated interaction) x 2 (ability) x 2 (type of task) analysis of variance. The results indicated significant main effects of anticipated interaction, F (1,101 = 14.72, $p < .001$, and of partners' ability, F (1,101) = 27.81, $p < .001$). Subjects responded more favorably to partners with whom they anticipated interaction ($\overline{X} = 2.98$) than to those with whom they didn't anticipate interaction ($\overline{X} = 4.13$). Also, subjects responded more favorably to partners of high ability ($\overline{X} = 2.81$) than to partners of low ability ($\overline{X} = 4.28$). No main effect for type of task was indicated, $F < 1$.

Analysis of variance also indicated an Anticipated Interaction x Ability interaction, F (1,101) = 5.49, $p < .02$. Simple effects analyses indicated that the distinction between good and poor ability only held for those subjects not anticipating interaction, F (1,101) = 27.41, $p < .001$, but not for those anticipating interaction, F (1,101 = 3.07, p = n.s.). Also, no difference was obtained on preferences for good partners regardless of anticipated or non-anticipated interaction, F (1,101) = 1.10, p = n.s. However, poor partners were less preferred under conditions of no anticipated interaction than under conditions of anticipated interaction, F (1,101) = 19.29, $p < .001$.

Type of task also interacted significantly with ability, F (1,101) 4.03, $p < .03$. Simple effects analyses indicated that good performers were more preferred for a work task, F (1,101) = 2.91, $p < .09$ than for a social task, but that poor performers were equally non-preferred regardless of task, F (1,101) = 1.25, p = n.s. Also, the magnitude of the difference in preferences for good vs. poor performers was greater in the work situation F (1,101) = 23.25, $p < .001$, than in the social situation, F (1,101) = 4.73, $p < .05$. Table 1 presents the means for the interaction data. No other significant interactions were indicated by the data.

Table 1

Mean Ratings of Partners Under Anticipated Future Interaction and Type of Task for Different Levels of Partner Ability

	Future Interaction		Task	
Partner Ability	Anticipated	Not Anticipated	Social	Work
Good	2.87 (n=26)	3.06 (n=29)	3.16 (n=28)	2.46 (n=27)
Poor	3.39 (n=28)	5.18 (n=26)	4.08 (n=27)	4.51 (n=27)

NOTE: Lower numbers indicate more positive appraisal on a seven-point scale.

DISCUSSION

The relationship derived from Heider's (1958) balance theory that anticipation of interaction with a partner enhances the individuals' evaluation of the partners was replicated. Subjects expressed significantly more positive affect towards their partner if they expected to interact with her later in the experiment. This relationship held true for both work and social type tasks.

Also replicated was the often found relationship betweer attraction and ability. Subjects in the present experiment preferred partners of high ability to low ability partners although anticipated interaction and type of task qualified the relationship as described below.

The key question posed by the present research was which of two theoretical explanations could most adequately account for the relationship between anticipated interaction and interpersonal attraction. It will be recalled that the ability variable was seen as crucial to this test. Thus, if the anticipated rewardingness explanation proposed by Berscheid and Walster (1969) was the primary determinant of interpersonal attraction, then partners of high ability should be most preferred under conditions of anticipated interaction since their ability should in some measure insure a positive outcome to the interaction. The results do not support this explanation since "good partners" were equally liked regardless of the subjects' expectations for future interactions.

This finding is consistent with the work of Layton & Insko (1974) and Sutherland & Insko (1967) who found that partner similarity (their measure of rewardingness) did not enhance partner evaluation under conditions of anticipated interaction. Thus, the evidence would seem to indicate that the anticipated rewards from interaction interpretation of exchange theory is not a viable explanation of the anticipated interaction-attraction effect. Consistent with this conclusion is a study by Insko et al. (1973) which found that expected rewardingness of an anticipated interaction was not related to a similarity-attraction effect.

It would appear that a dissonance explanation best accounts for the present results. Thus, subjects, in order to prepare themselves for an interaction with a somewhat unknown quantity, "hedge their bets" by convincing themselves that all will be well since the partner is quite likeable. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that poor performers were less negatively evaluated under conditions of anticipated interaction than when interaction was not anticipated. Thus, the situation of anticipating interaction with not only a stranger but one who has been described as relatively unskilled at the interaction task should heighten dissonance and does result in a more positive appraisal than if the subject is merely asked to evaluate this unskilled stranger without expecting to have to interact with her. This finding is reminiscent of the results of a study by Mirels and Mills (1964) in which subjects who anticipated interacting with a less than ideal partner distorted their perception of that partner's pleasantness.

The results regarding the relationship between type of task and ability on liking suggest that ability is more salient in work situations than in social ones. This is interesting since partner ability was specifically related to both situations. Thus, despite a clear indication that the partner was not good at the social task, subjects did not consider this fact as important as they did in the work situation. Perhaps the historical association of ability and work might account for this relationship.

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